An Effective Way to Teach Vocabulary to Language Minority Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract
What is the best way to teach students vocabulary? This paper discusses an interdisciplinary instructional technique used to teach language minority students with learning disabilities new vocabulary words. The goal of the study is to teach important vocabulary words while also improving their reading comprehension skills. The vocabulary words chosen were key words necessary for understanding the material students were learning in English, Math, History, and Biology. The lessons used, the relevant research, and the results will be discussed in this paper.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study was to find an effective way to teach vocabulary to language minority students with learning disabilities. There were three main goals I wanted to achieve in this study. The first goal was to teach words that were relevant to school and their classes. The second goal was to find a way for the students to be able to remember and use the words everyday. The third goal was to increase their reading comprehension by teaching them how to figure out the definition of an unknown word by using the context of a sentence.

As an English teacher of language minority students that also had learning disabilities, I realized that these students had a great with reading comprehension. The instructional technique in this study is meant to increase students reading comprehension by teaching students key words before they encounter them in their respective classes. I collaborated with teachers in my team, and came up with one particular strategy to teach vocabulary throughout the year. I will discuss the implementation of this strategy and the results.

Background Information
Two years ago, I began teaching at Wakefield High school in Arlington, Virginia. Wakefield is located in a suburban setting in South Arlington, approximately seven miles outside of Washington DC. Wakefield has a very diverse population. It has a student body of approximately 1600 students. The ethnic group distribution is: Asian – 171, Black – 425, Hispanic – 786, White – 255.
I teach 9th grade English to students who are learning disabled. When a student moves up from the middle school into Wakefield, they are put into a team, called a house. I teach in House 4, which is compromised of students who are classified as learning disabled. There are four teachers in House 4 including myself. Each one of us teaches a core subject, which includes English, Technology, History, Math, and Biology. We have a total of 25 students in our House, 13 of who speak English as a second language. Five of those students have been in HILT classes. HILT is a program for students who are non native English speaking.

As an English teacher of language minority students that also had learning disabilities, I realized that these students have a reading level that is well below grade level. One of the graduation requirements in the state of Virginia for a modified standard diploma is for a student to pass the 8th grade Reading Standards of Learning test. The only one of my students to have passed this test is a repeating 9th grader. I wanted to find a strategy that would not only teach these students key vocabulary words in a way that they would remember and use them, but more importantly to increase their reading comprehension.

**Strategies for Building Vocabulary**

When trying to come up with a strategy, I had to take into account that many of my students were not only learning disabled but they speak English as a second language as well. I came up with a strategy that accomplishes all three goals, while keeping this in mind.

At the beginning of every month I introduced ten new words. Students were not given the definitions to the words. Each word was given to them in a sentence. They had to guess the meaning of each word using the context clues in the sentence. After they attempted their guesses, I gave them the definition. They then had to circle the context clues in the sentence. This strategy teaches students to use context clues to guess the definition of unfamiliar words that they encounter in their reading. Their homework assignment was to draw a picture that represents the definition of each word. They also had to write a sentence using each word. For each sentence they wrote, they underlined the context clues in that sentence.

The words that were chosen were words that had to do with what they were doing that month in all their classes. For example, in December students had to write a research paper for Science. The vocabulary words for that month included content, elaborate, paraphrase, investigate, relevant, and reference. All these words are words that are necessary to know in order to write a research paper. The words that were taught to students at the beginning of the school year included mandatory, punctual, etiquette, and consequence, and ambitious. These words were taught at the beginning of the school year; because they are words that we thought necessary for students to know in order to be successful in school. It helps students to see and learn key words before they encounter them in their textbooks. According to Armbruster (2001) teaching specific words before reading helps both vocabulary learning and reading comprehension.
Armbruster also goes on to say that teaching important vocabulary before reading can help students both learn new words and comprehend the text. Students were encouraged to use the vocabulary words by receiving extra credit points for using them. Students gained extra credit points by one of three ways. If a student heard a teacher say a word during a lesson, they would receive one point. If a student said a word in proper context or they found a word in writing they would gain two extra points. If a student used a word in their writing they would receive three extra credit points. These points were used to get extra credit on tests. This system encouraged students to use the vocabulary words in different contexts. The more students use new words and the more they use them in different contexts, the more likely they are to learn the words (Armbruster, 2001). Every teacher in the team took part. A student could earn and use points in any of their core classes.

**Literature Review**

Much research has been done regarding vocabulary and reading comprehension. Students must develop strategies and learn to use textual cues to make sense of text – that is, construct meaning (Goodman, 1996). Teaching vocabulary is an important aspect for improving reading comprehension. One aspect of the technique I used in this study was to teach students to use contextual clues to make sense of a word.

Students, who have trouble reading, often try to sound out every word. This causes students to concentrate on each individual word, instead of comprehending the meaning of the text. According to Ciborowski (1992) when engaged in textbook reading, low readers tend to expend more time and energy struggling with individuals words than on constructing meaning from the text. Ciborowski also states that as low readers over attend to individual words, they are less able to utilize the context to predict meaning.

One of the dilemmas students face is that few effectively learn how and when to use strategies to explore and construct meaning during tasks that require literacy (Vacca, Vacca 1999). One of the goals of this study was to teach them a strategy in which they can improve their comprehension ability. Every one of my students has difficulty in the area of reading comprehension. Learning vocabulary is a key to improving reading comprehension. Armbruster (2001) states that vocabulary is very important to reading comprehension. Readers can’t understand what they are reading without knowing what most of the words mean. Armbruster also goes on to state that direct instruction of vocabulary relevant to a given text leads to better reading comprehension.

Learners see vocabulary as a very important part of language learning and often use it to measure their progress or lack of progress. By taking an informed, balanced and systematic approach to vocabulary teaching, teachers can help learners achieve better results and feel happy about their progress (Nation, 2003). I think this is especially true with language minority students, and one of the reasons I chose this particular strategy. The instructional technique discussed in this paper accomplishes this.
Data Collection and Findings

My findings are based on four methods of data collection. The first was teacher observation. The second was a survey given to the student. The third method used was quizzes given to students throughout the year, and the fourth method used was standardized testing. The standardized test used was the Degree of Reading Powers (DRP). The DRP was administered at the beginning of the school year, as well as at the end of the school year. The DRP measures how well students understand the meaning of text.

Students were asked in a survey a number of questions, including whether or not the vocabulary words were relevant, did the strategy increase their vocabulary, what other ways would have been helpful in learning these vocabulary words, and they were asked if they used the vocabulary words to gain extra points. The answers on the survey backed up my observations throughout the school year.

Thirteen students said that the vocabulary words were relevant to class work, while seven were either not sure or said that the words were not relevant. When asked if they used the words to gain extra credit points, most students said that they did. I also asked the students if their teachers encouraged them to use the words of the month. Eleven students that their teachers encouraged them to use the words, while nine said they the teachers did not encourage them to use the words enough. Observing students throughout the year, I noticed that about half of them were enthusiastic about gaining extra credit points.

I gave quizzes to students once every two months. Students didn’t score on high on the quizzes as I would have liked. While I did use vocabulary quizzes to assess students, I found that observation and surveys was a much better assessment as to how well the students knew the vocabulary words. The students who used them the most to gain extra points were the students who scored the highest on the quizzes.

One of the goals of this study was to improve reading comprehension. I assessed this by using the DRP. The DRP was given twice, in September and in June. Every student scored higher in June, except for one.

Reflections

It was clear to me from the start that most students were enthusiastic about using the monthly vocabulary words to gain extra points. I knew students understood the definition of a word when they started trying to use that word a lot to gain extra credit points. At that point the word was retired, meaning they could not use that word anymore to gain extra points. One problem that I encountered was that students were more enthusiastic at the beginning of the month. Towards the end of the month, students would be less likely to use words. We did not do enough to encourage students to use words throughout the whole month.

There were a couple of obstacles I had to overcome due to my students learning disabilities. One of those obstacles was that they often did not use the
vocabulary words in correct sentences. For example, on a homework assignment a student wrote the sentence; I have apathy about school. The vocabulary word in the sentence is apathy. As the teacher, I realized that the student understood the meaning of the word even though it wasn't used correctly. Another example of an incorrect sentence was; I really persevere my homework.

Another obstacle I had to overcome was the fact that most students are afraid to make guesses. It took three or four months for students to feel comfortable making guesses. Once students became comfortable with making guesses with this lesson, the next challenge was to get them to use this comprehension strategy every time they came to an unfamiliar word.

Was this and effective strategy to teach language minority students with learning disabilities vocabulary? Did I accomplish my three main goals with this teaching strategy? I feel that the answer to both of these questions is yes. Students showed an understanding of the vocabulary words by using them to gain extra points. They knew what the words meant before they encountered them in the text. The words taught were all relevant to a particular subject. As far as reading comprehension, the increase in standardized test scores show that students increased their level of reading comprehension.

Implications

This study used an effective interdisciplinary instructional technique. One question that this study raised for me is to further study the effectiveness of interdisciplinary lessons in other areas. Another possible outgrowth of this research is a comparison of the effectiveness of different types of vocabulary lessons.

References